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THE HOLY BIBLE **NKJV** REFERENCE GUIDE

OLD TESTAMENT

BOOK 15

EZRA



Cyrus King of Persia by Shakiba

SUMMARY

In accordance with the prophecy of Jeremiah and inspired by the Lord, Emperor Cyrus of Persia commands and helps Judah to return to and rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. In his proclamation., Cyrus stresses that he has been given all the kingdoms of the earth by God. Temple items are also returned. The Jews are led by Sheshbazzar, prince of Judah.

Israel returns from exile in Babylon to Jerusalem and Judah, led by Zerubbabel. The returnees are listed – 42,360 in all. Freewill offerings are made to help rebuild the temple.

On the seventh month (which sees the celebration of Atonement, Trumpets and Tabernacles), the Jerusalem temple altar is rebuilt on its ancient foundation. Sacrifices and festivals begin again. Temple rebuilding begins, accompanied by joyous singing and praising of the Lord. Some weep, others rejoice.

The enemies of Judah offer to help rebuild the temple, but Zerubbabel refuses their assistance. Resistance to the rebuilding project continues from Cyrus to the reign of Darius. The Samaritan adversaries of Judah, under Ahasuerus (485-465 bc), write an accusation against the people of Judah and Jerusalem.

In the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia (464-424 bc), the Samaritans write a letter saying that if Jerusalem is rebuilt, Persian control of it will cease. Artaxerxes forces the rebuilding project to cease – which it does until the second year of the reign of Darius.

Haggai and Zechariah exhort the people to start rebuilding the temple. It does. Tattenai, the governor of the river, writes to king Darius, saying rebuilding has started on the joint authority of the Lord and of Cyrus.

Emperor Darius searches royal records, find Cyrus' decree, and orders the rebuilding of temple to continue. The temple is completed, dedicated. Passover is kept.

Ezra (a skilled scribe, an Aaronic priest and descendant of Zadok) gains Artaxerxes' favor, and returns from Babylon to Jerusalem. Artaxerxes commands Ezra to offer all the gold and silver found in Babylon for the temple. Ezra is also given the power to impose taxes, and enforce the Mosaic law. Ezra gives thanks.

Ezra (writing in the first person) provides a list of all those who accompanied him to Jerusalem. Ezra does not ask for a Persian escort, trusting in the Lord to protect them. Gifts to the temple are made.

Some Jews marry non-Jews. Writing in the first person, Ezra grieves, prays to God in front of people, confesses sins, humbles himself, and intercedes for Jews.

A meeting is held about Jews marrying foreign women. Shechaniah proposes a covenant to put away foreign wives. A period of mourning ensues, and the Jews confess their offence, agreeing to put away their wives. Each case of intermarriage is investigated over a period of three months. A list of the guilty is supplied.

NKJV SELECTED SCRIPTURE

- 6:3** In the first year of King Cyrus, King Cyrus issued a decree concerning the house of God at Jerusalem: Let the house be rebuilt, the place where they offered sacrifices; and let the foundations of it be firmly laid, its height sixty cubits and its width sixty cubits,
- 6:4** with three rows of heavy stones and one row of new timber. Let the expenses be paid from the king's treasury.
- 6:5** Also let the gold and silver articles of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took from the temple which is in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, be restored and taken back to the temple which is in Jerusalem, each to its place; and deposit them in the house of God
- 7:9** On the first day of the first month he began his journey from Babylon, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, according to the good hand of his God upon him.
- 7:10** For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel.
- 8:31** Then we departed from the river of Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month, to go to Jerusalem. And the hand of our God was upon us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambush along the road.

CHARACTER Definitions

EZRA - Ezra was the second of three key leaders to leave Babylon for the reconstruction of Jerusalem. Zerubbabel reconstructed the temple, Nehemiah rebuilt the walls and Ezra restored the worship.

Ezra was a scribe and priest sent with religious and political powers by the Persian King Artaxerxes to lead a group of Jewish exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem. Ezra condemned mixed marriages and encouraged Jews to divorce and banish their foreign wives. The most dramatic part of the book is the crisis over marriages between Jewish leaders and women from the peoples of the lands.

Ezra renewed the celebration of festivals and supported the rededication of the temple and the rebuilding of the Jerusalem wall. Ezra 7:10 describes a shaping of the community in accordance with the Torah. Ezra's goal was to implement the Torah, and his impeccable priestly and scribal credentials allowed him to remain the model leader.

The book of Ezra continues from where 2 Chronicles ends, with Cyrus, king of Persia, issuing a decree which permits the Jews of his kingdom to return to Jerusalem after seventy years of captivity. God is universally sovereign and can use a polytheistic king of Persia to make possible His people's release.

He used Artaxerxes, another Persian king, to authorize and finance the trip and Ezra to teach God's people His Law. This same king also helped Nehemiah restore some measure of respectability to God's holy city.

Ezra's effective ministry included teaching the Word of God, initiating reforms, restoring worship and leading spiritual revival in Jerusalem. These reforms magnified the need for a genuine concern for reputation and for public image.

CHARACTERS Continued

What must the world think of God's people with dilapidated city walls? What would distinguish God's people who were guilty of intermarriage with those not in proper covenant relationship with the one true God?

Nehemiah and Ezra were then, and are now, an encouragement to God's people to magnify worship as their top priority, to emphasize the need for and use of God's Word as the only authoritative rule for living, and to be concerned about the image God's people show to the world.

Ezra came back from captivity in Babylon expecting to find the people serving the Lord with gladness, but upon his return to Jerusalem, he found the opposite. He was frustrated and sorrowful. His heart ached, but he still trusted the Lord. He wanted the Lord to change the situation and blamed himself for not being able to change the people's hearts.

He wanted the people to know how important and essential the Word of God was. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah were written to fulfill the Word of God. Nothing must supersede worship of God, and obedience is not optional.

The Sovereign God looks over and protects His children, always keeping His promises and providing encouragement through those He sends. Even when His plan seems to be interrupted, as with the rebuilding of Jerusalem, God steps in at the appropriate time to continue His plan.

God is as intimately involved in our lives as He was with Ezra's life, and like Ezra we are sometimes enabled to do the impossible. Ezra did the impossible, for the hand the Lord his God was on him. Every believer is a living temple in which the Holy Spirit dwells.

The opposing forces in Ezra's day were people with evil in their hearts. The opposing force in our Christian lives today is evil himself, Satan, who has come to destroy us and in turn destroy God's temple. Our goals should be worthy in God's eyes as well as our own.

Yesterday's sorrows can be today's successes if the hand of the Lord is upon us. Ezra's goal was worthy in God's eyes, and he effectively used the returning Jews' sorrows for the success of rebuilding God's city and restoring worship.

ZERUBBABEL – In 538 BC, Zerubbabel, the leader of the tribe of Judah, was part of the first wave of Jewish captives to return to Jerusalem. The Persian king appointed Zerubbabel as governor of Judah, and right away Zerubbabel began rebuilding the temple with the help of Joshua, the high priest. The first temple, built by King Solomon, had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BC.

It took Zerubbabel two years to rebuild the foundation of the temple. Then construction was delayed by Samaritan settlers whose friendly overtures masked a hidden hostility. As a result of the opposition to the temple construction, Persia withdrew support for the project, and for seventeen years the temple sat unfinished.

CHARACTERS Continued

Finally, God sent the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to encourage and support Zerubbabel, and the work on the second temple resumed. Four years later, in 515 BC, the temple was completed and dedicated with great fanfare.

The Jews also observed the Passover. It's interesting that Zerubbabel is never mentioned in connection with the dedication ceremonies, nor is his name mentioned again after Ezra 5:1. For this reason, Zerubbabel's temple is often referred to simply as the second temple.

It is obvious that the Lord God was pleased with Zerubbabel's efforts in returning the captives to Jerusalem, in building the second temple, and in reestablishing the temple worship.

With God's prompting, Haggai gave Zerubbabel a special blessing: On that day, declares the LORD Almighty, I will take you, my servant Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, declares the LORD, and I will make you like my signet ring, for I have chosen you, declares the LORD Almighty.

As the second temple was being built, there was a group of Jews in Jerusalem who were rather disappointed. Older Jews who recalled the size and grandeur of the first temple regarded Zerubbabel's temple as a poor substitute for the original. To their minds, it did not even begin to compare with the splendor of Solomon's temple.

It was true that Zerubbabel's temple was built on a smaller scale and with much fewer resources. Also, Solomon's temple had housed the Ark of the Covenant, which was no longer in Israel's possession. And at the first temple's dedication, the altar had been lit by fire from heaven, and the temple had been filled with the Shekinah; attendees at the second temple's dedication witnessed no such miracles.

Even so, Haggai prophesied that the second temple would one day have a magnificence to outshine the glory of the first. Haggai's word was fulfilled 500 years later when Jesus Christ arrived on the scene. Zerubbabel's temple was not as outwardly impressive as Solomon's, but it had a greater glory: the Messiah Himself walked the courts of the temple that Zerubbabel built.

DARIUS – The book of Ezra mentions a king named Darius, also known as Darius I. He was the son of Hystaspes, the founder of the Persian dynasty. Darius I was king of Persia from 521 to 486 BC. His reign followed that of Cyrus the Great.

Darius I is presented as a good king who helped the Israelites in several ways. Prior to Darius's reign, the Jews who had returned from the Babylonian Captivity had begun rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem.

At that time, Israel's enemies did everything in their power to disrupt the construction, and they had succeeded in halting the building during the reigns of the kings Ahasuerus and Artaxerxes.

When Darius became king, construction of the temple resumed in the second year of his reign. But the Jews' enemies again attempted to thwart their efforts. Tattenai, the Persian governor of Judea, wrote a letter to Darius in an effort to turn the king against the Israelites and stop the building of the temple.

CHARACTERS Continued

But Darius responded by commanding Tattenai and his companions to stay far away from the site and let the Jewish elders continue with the rebuilding. Furthermore, the king decreed that the Jewish workers were to be paid from the royal treasury, that the builders would be given whatever was needed for the burnt offerings, and that anyone attempting to destroy the temple or disobey his decree would be impaled on a beam from his own house, which would be made a pile of rubble.

By his decrees, Darius I showed himself to be a friend of Israel, and the Jews in Jerusalem prospered under his watch. The temple was completed in the sixth year of his reign.

ARTAXERES - Artaxerxes is described in the Bible as having commissioned Ezra, a Jewish priest and scribe, by means of a letter of decree, to take charge of the ecclesiastical and civil affairs of the Jewish nation.

Ezra thereby left Babylon in the first month of the seventh year of Artaxerxes' reign, at the head of a company of Jews that included priests and Levites. They arrived in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month of the seventh year.

The rebuilding of the Jewish community in Jerusalem had begun under Cyrus the Great, who had permitted Jews held captive in Babylon to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple of Solomon.

Consequently, a number of Jews returned to Jerusalem in 538 BC, and the foundation of this "Second Temple" was laid in 536 BC, in the second year of their return. After a period of strife, the temple was finally completed in the sixth year of Darius, 516 BC.

In Artaxerxes' 21st year (445 BC), Nehemiah, the king's cupbearer, apparently was also a friend of the king as in that year Artaxerxes inquired after Nehemiah's sadness. Nehemiah related to him the plight of the Jewish people and that the city of Jerusalem was undefended.

The king sent Nehemiah to Jerusalem with letters of safe passage to the governors in Trans-Euphrates, and to Asaph, keeper of the royal forests, to make beams for the citadel by the Temple and to rebuild the city walls.

BIBLE TIMELINE

537 BC	The Proclamation of Cyrus	Ezra 1
537 BC	The Exiles Return	Ezra 2
535 BC	Temple Work Begins	Ezra 3
534 BC	Artaxerxes Orders Work Stopped	Ezra 4:17
520 BC	Temple Work Resumed by Darius' Decree	Ezra 6
515 BC	Completion and Dedication of the Temple	Ezra 6:16
458 BC	Ezra Journeys to Jerusalem	Ezra 7
457 BC	Ezra's reforms	Ezra 9
456 BC	Ezra's Prayer About Intermarriage	Ezra 10

MAP REFERENCES

